

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

What I Forgot

Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree. No fruit here, just soaking up the sun, growing roots, turning green, stretching out my branches until I can hug the horizon.

Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree, because she doesn't produce, and she's not exhausted,

and she probably gets eight hours of sleep at night.

And her branches,

unlike my shoulders, are not heavy with work— pulled toward the ground, threatening to break.

And her trunk, unlike my spine,

is not fighting to stand tall while holding it all together.

Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree

because she knows what I forgot many years ago.

You are still worthy even if

you don't produce

Whenever JC presents a parable for us to consider, we are challenged to think just a little bit harder. Parables, by their very nature and purpose, will not settle into easy answers or simplistic explanations. Anytime you think you may have a parable all figured out, it's time to take a step back and see if there might be something you missed, something you should reconsider, something you ignored. Because a parable is never straightforward. Never. I'm pretty sure it's "never".

Part of what makes a parable so hard to interpret is that they are crafted intentionally to head fake us – to unsettle us. Take the parable of the fig tree that we hear today. The people who heard this directly from Jesus were Jewish. Their tradition already offered a ready explanation for the story that JC tells. Because the people of Israel had often been referred to as God's vineyard. In the prophetic teachings and poetic literature of their past, the analogy of being the landowner's vineyard is a ready lens for figuring out what JC is saying. To them it would have seemed perfectly clear.

So, let's play that out. JC tells this story – God, the landowner, plants a fig tree in the vineyard. That might sound a bit odd – planting a fig tree in the middle of grape vines – but scholarship has suggested it's not that out of line for the day. Fig trees would have given the vineyard owner a sense of what the soil was like and whether the grapevines would be successful. So the landowner, God, plants this fig tree – presumably to bear figs if not just for soil testing, but maybe also to have figs, which the rest of the parable plays out – then

we've established who started and why. God planted what we presume to be us – the people of God, playing the part of the fig tree. God planted us for a purpose – bearing fruit.

But we're not doing so well at that. For 3 years, God has waited for the fruit to come, and we aren't living up to our purpose. We're not bearing the fruit we're supposed to be. We're not succeeding as God's people. So, in comes the gardener – clearly representing Jesus who begs for more time. Give these people another year. Let me do what a gardener does, nourishing them, covering them with...fertilizer...to make them healthier and more purposeful. Just give me a little time and I'll make it right. Then, if they still fail, you can give up on them and cut them down.

That got ugly real fast. I was okay with the analogy until now. If this is how we interpret this parable – then who is responsible for bearing fruit? Who is ultimately responsible for fulfilling the purpose for which they have been planted/created?

The fig tree...the people. And on some levels, that's not an entirely bad analogy for our life of faith. We are responsible for bearing fruit in our lives. We are expected to fulfill God's purpose for us.

But last time I checked, we are not...cannot...will not ever be able to accomplish our purpose, our salvation. There's only one way that happens, and we can't do it. Which means, ultimately, we're going to be chopped down and abandoned by the landowner as a failure. There is no grace in this parable if we're the unproductive fig tree just waiting for the axe whenever we fail.

Unless we were never the fig tree to begin with. Maybe, we should start somewhere else to interpret this parable. What if, instead of assuming the obvious – that the landowner is a simple allegory for God – what if we assume that we are the landowner? What if this story is about how we live out the call of discipleship? We have a vineyard – our life – in which God has offered us grace-filled love and forgiveness and asked us to use that grace to bear fruit in the world. Remember, it's a vineyard, not just a fig tree.

We, as landowners, aren't solely responsible for all that happens – it's not solely our actions that bring the fruit to bear. Someone else is shoveling the manure to make it all happen. Maybe that's Jesus – that's certainly an appropriate interpretation. Jesus comes over and over again to bring us what is life-giving and necessary to flourish. Over and over again, the loving gardener supports us and nourishes us so that we get from useless to fruit bearing.

Maybe also, that gardener of the parable is someone else in our life who brings us

what we need. Maybe, God's grace and love nourishes us in the lives of those we encounter. Maybe, the nourishment we need comes from the people around us. Without which, we shrivel up and fail.

Maybe we're supposed to hear this story as a warning against being so impatient that we miss what God is fertilizing our life with. Maybe we're so impatient to get the fruits of labor that we miss what God is doing. Maybe we just need to slow down and see what God is doing before we turn to our axe. Because, guess what, Mr. Impatient Landowner...a fig tree can take **3-5 years to bear ripe fruit.**

I'm not saying there aren't real consequences of failing to bear fruit, but when we shift the focus of this parable, we might just shift our focus away from fearing the axe to remembering the fruit we can offer the world. Jesus told this story in response to the harsh realities of life – both the story of Herod's intentional sacrilegious behavior and the randomness of a tower falling and killing innocent people. The response to those realities that Jesus lifts up is repentance – the changing of heart, mind, and action to focus on God's call to discipleship.

Instead of acting like an impatient landowner who is quick to discard a tree that seems useless, maybe we can take a lesson from the gardener and try to shovel the love we've been offered onto the roots of those we encounter. Maybe we can spend less time focused on that threat of judgment we're so quick to offer and find instead a way to bring life to the world. Maybe we can stop trying to play God and accept what God has offered – the grace shown by the gardener, the Christ, for you; for the world. Amen.